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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000393

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NEA/ELA, NSC FOR MARCHESE, H FOR CODEL ISSA

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SUBJECT: CODEL ISSA VISIT TO SYRIA APRIL 5: MEETING WITH FM  
MU'ALLIM

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, for reasons 1.4 b/d

11. (C) Summary: Congressman Darrell Issa met with Foreign Minister Mu'allim for 45 minutes on April 5. They discussed Syria's desire for a new U.S. ambassador to Syria, intelligence cooperation, the SARG's November 2006 closing of Amideast - which Mu'allim linked to U.S. sanctions, Syria's relations with Hamas and Iran, Israeli prisoners, and operational concerns of both the U.S. and Syrian embassies. End Summary.

12. (C) On April 5, Congressman Darrell Issa (R-CA) and House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence staff members, David Abruzzino and Jeremy Bash, met with Foreign Minister Walid Mu'allim, Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad, and Mu'allim Office Director, Bassam Sabbagh, for approximately 45 minutes. At Congressman Issa's request, Charge d'Affaires and Emboff (notetaker) accompanied the CODEL.

13. (C) A NEW U.S. AMBASSADOR TO SYRIA: Congressman Issa said he could see Asad was frustrated with the current state of U.S.-Syrian relations. Mu'allim responded that the current U.S. administration had tried to isolate Syria and had failed. Mu'allim said he was receiving frequent delegations and going on official visits. Mu'allim commented that he didn't want to interfere in internal U.S. politics, but he called for the U.S. to appoint a new U.S. Ambassador to Syria. Mu'allim said that the U.S. needed an ambassador to launch a constructive dialogue, and that a Charge D'Affaires just didn't have the right level of access to move policy. Issa responded he wasn't sure a U.S. ambassador for Syria could be confirmed in the Senate.

14. (C) INTELLIGENCE COOPERATION: Issa said Syria and the U.S. needed to have an official intelligence liaison to work on common interests. Mu'allim responded that the intelligence cooperation Syria had with the United States was interrupted by the withdrawal of Ambassador Scobey in February 2005. Miqdad also interjected that the intelligence information Syria had provided to the U.S. had been leaked, endangering Syria's own intelligence environment. Mu'allim added, "why would we work for U.S. interests when the U.S. is actively working against our interests?"

15. (C) LINKING THE CLOSING OF AMIDEAST TO U.S. SANCTIONS: Issa brought up the SARG's November 2006 closing of Washington-based NGO, Amideast, stating that Amideast had operated in Syria for decades. Through its many people-to-people programs and educational opportunities, Amideast provided a good opportunity to promote dialogue and understanding between Syria and the United States, according

to Issa. Mu'allim responded that Syrians were not anti-American, but that Amideast's closing was a reaction to U.S. policies. Without explaining the logic of closing Amideast, Mu'allim raised U.S. sanctions. He stated Syrian Arab Airlines was unable to get spare Boeing parts due to sanctions and that this endangered the lives of Syrians. Mu'allim asked, "what does an Amideast give when people's safety is threatened?" As another example, Mu'allim complained that the U.S. had voted against Syria's application to begin WTO talks "four times." This was just on pre-discussions, Mu'allim emphasized, not on actual WTO negotiations. Mu'allim said that the U.S. stance on these issues was repeating Syria's negative experience in the 1950's when the Egyptians tried to force the Syrians to take actions it didn't want to. Now, Mu'allim said, Syria was being forced to buy planes from Russia rather than the United States. Mu'allim also raised the issue of President Asad's private jet being grounded in France because of spare parts needed, complaining that Asad was forced to rent planes to travel.

16. (C) HAMAS AND IRAN: Mu'allim commented that if the U.S. wanted the SARG to work on Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and countering terrorism, it needed to improve relations with Syria. Mu'allim said Hamas was an example of how Syria could engage on regional issues. Mu'allim said the SARG was able to encourage Hamas to agree to a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders, indirectly recognizing the state of Israel. Mu'allim said Syria also urged Hamas to reach a cease-fire with Israel in Gaza, and they had even gotten as far as discussing what ministers might be nominated for a unity government. Mu'allim said Syria wanted to engage Hamas - and Hizbollah - in the political process, rather than alienating them and encouraging them to take up arms.

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Mu'allim said Syria could also be helpful in engaging Iran. Miqdad interjected that Syria was trying to motivate Iran to be a better regional actor.

17. (C) ISRAELI AND POLITICAL PRISONERS: Issa showed Mu'allim a list of kidnapped Israeli soldiers and Syrian political prisoners. Miqdad responded that in the past a delegation led by Lee Hamilton had gone to the places where people thought Israeli soldiers had been buried and they had found nothing. Mu'allim said that the body of Eli Cohen was a public issue and would have to be dealt with as part of a peace process with Israel because the Syrian public would not stand for dealing with the remains of a "spy" in any other way. Mu'allim added that the start of a discussion on two Israeli soldiers held by Hizballah had to come from Israel and that when there was an authorized envoy to discuss these issues, Syria would help. Mu'allim said Syria was asked to assist on the issue of Gilad Shalit, taken by Hamas last summer, and that they had discussed the issue with the Turks, the Russians, the Spanish, as well as Jesse Jackson. He said, however, that as Egypt was taking the lead with Hamas, Syria did not want to interfere. Miqdad tried to bring up the issue of Syrian prisoners held by Israel, but Mu'allim told him not to complicate the issue. Mu'allim and Issa closed the conversation by discussing the Golan and the peace process, with Mu'allim noting that without a strong leader on the Israeli side it would be difficult to move forward.

18. (C) DIFFICULT EMBASSY OPERATIONS: Issa raised the SARG's delay in visa issuance for personnel linked to the U.S. Embassy in Damascus. Issa specifically raised the problems faced by the U.S. Defense Attach's Office (DAO), and reminded Mu'allim that the DAO was responsible for providing information to the SARG related to the terms of the 1974 cease-fire agreement. Issa stressed the need for the U.S. embassy to be fully operational. Issa also noted that one of the provisions of the Syrian Accountability Act was to restrict the movement of Syrian diplomats in the U.S., but that President Bush had not yet implemented that particular provision. Issa asked that Syria show the same respect for

U.S. diplomats in Syria. Mu'allim was noncommittal to these requests. Miqdad and Sabbagh used this opportunity to raise the issue of banking and communications difficulties at the Syrian embassy in Washington. They claimed that no banks would work with the Syrian diplomats and that this issue needed to be resolved. They also complained that the Syrian embassy was not able to send faxes. Miqdad claimed that if the State Department did something positive about this, the response would be "ten times" from the Syrian side.

19. (U) This cable was cleared by CODEL Issa after the CODEL's departure from Syria.  
CORBIN